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THE HIRSHHORN MUSEUM AND SCULPTURE GARDEN

**THE SEASONAL INFLATABLE STRUCTURE AND CENTER FOR DIALOGUE:
A RESPONSE TO THE SMITHSONIAN'S ASSESSMENT REPORT OF APRIL 2013,
AND FURTHER EVALUATION OF THE INITIATIVE'S FEASIBILITY**

Developed by

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The Seasonal Inflatable Structure and Center for Creative Dialogue, a unified initiative launched nearly four years ago by the Hirshhorn Museum, is reaching a pivotal and long-awaited juncture.

From the very beginning, this initiative – among the “signature projects” first reviewed by the Museum’s Board in 2009 – has captured the attention of the international artist and cultural community; garnered prominent media coverage in top publications (some critical, the majority positive); won prestigious design awards; attracted myriad collaborative invitations from universities, think tanks, and artists; and secured funding from nationally recognized individuals and organizations. The initial SIS proposal was unanimously approved by both the National Capital Planning Commission and the U.S. Commission on Fine Arts on the first review – exceedingly rare in the history of both agencies. In 2011, the Smithsonian Institution, too, became a leading sponsor of the initiative, with an unusual 10-year, \$4 million programmatic grant authorized by the Secretary. Moreover, in recognition of its educational benefits, potential for highly diverse audiences, and future-oriented approach, the Smithsonian has awarded the initiative “mission-critical” status, making it part of a select group of Institution-wide assets capable of benefiting the entire consortium.

Throughout the past 4 years, the many people closely involved in the project – the architects and designers, Hirshhorn trustees, staff in many Museum departments and numerous other Smithsonian agencies – have also recognized that the SIS initiative poses various challenges, as would be expected with any significant new undertaking. As with new efforts at any institution, questions of funding, sustainability, and staff capacity must always be raised in connection with responsible management. The Hirshhorn’s physical site, like many of the Smithsonian’s facilities, also raises some logistics issues. All of these practical concerns have been closely examined throughout the initiative’s progress, with the ongoing consensus that they can be resolved with rigorous strategic planning and prudent fiscal management.

Starting in March 2013 with a special grant from a leading Hirshhorn Trustee, an intensive funding campaign for the initiative has been in progress, and is itself unprecedented in the Hirshhorn’s history. In just a few months the campaign has had remarkable success in terms of generating new proposals and securing nearly \$2 million in new support; other major gifts are currently pending as well. Meanwhile the May 2013 *Smithsonian Magazine* article on the SIS and the Center, featuring input by preeminent cultural and artistic leaders, is drawing enthusiastic responses from readers across the country.

With all of this momentum in play and the construction funding steadily growing, on May 23 the Hirshhorn Board of Trustees will make its recommendation whether to take this visionary initiative forward. The ultimate choice to proceed will rest with the Secretary of the Smithsonian, as it always has, and will come shortly thereafter.

To further clarify the context for this pivotal decision, this document presents a response to the April, 2013 initial draft report by the Project Assessment Team commissioned by Under Secretary Richard Kurin (apparently the report is now being somewhat altered). While the SIS Committee of Hirshhorn Trustees and Hirshhorn staff appreciate the report, the following pages outline other factors that must also be considered in making a decision that carries vital long-term consequences for the Hirshhorn and the Smithsonian alike. These factors include the following, among others:

The internal nature of the Assessment Report and the report team – and hence, its questionable validity vis-à-vis a professional commissioned study

The integral bond between the SIS and its educational, artistic, and cultural programmatic concepts

The benefits of the proposed SIS-Center programming to the Smithsonian's Grand Challenges and multidisciplinary consortia initiatives – furthering its role as an Institution-wide asset

The highly promising fundraising campaign now in progress, and its fiscal implications for the SIS and Center

The options for flexible program season scenarios that will enhance planning and fiscal management

The options to construct the SIS in two phases

Further reminders of the overall originality of the project – one-of-a-kind – and its larger benefits

Experience and Depth of Knowledge Relevant to the Smithsonian's Project Assessment Report

From the outset, it must be noted that the Project Assessment Team labeled its report a DRAFT – not a final, polished study. This draft, recently sent to the Hirshhorn Board of Trustees, was quickly assembled in 4 months, and omits much information that would have greatly deepened its findings and overall quality. This is partly due to ways in which its information was gathered: For example, the team scheduled only two brief group meetings with the Hirshhorn staff who have been closely involved with the project since 2009 – Richard Koshalek, Kerry Brougher, Jean Belitsky, Al Masino, Jennifer Barrett, and Erica Clark – and no individual interviews with them. This cursory contact prevented the Smithsonian team from gaining critically important, detailed knowledge about numerous planning factors, funding strategies, programming, and operational scenarios that the Hirshhorn staff has systematically acquired over four years of developing the project.

Similarly, the Assessment Team's report "Resources" include only three current Hirshhorn trustees, eight other Smithsonian staff (with no reasons given for their selection), and three "external consultants." The report fails to mention that over the past 4 years the Hirshhorn core group and other staff (along with some Trustees) has consulted extensively with leaders in many fields regarding the initiative – including university presidents and faculty; senior staff at think tanks and foundations; staff at Bloomberg, TED and the Aspen Institute; architects, engineers, and technology experts; artists in many disciplines; and directors and staff at other museums worldwide. Their input has been overwhelmingly positive and has not only helped to formulate the SIS and Center concepts, but to recognize many of the initiative's practical issues and challenges as well.

It is also significant that the Assessment Team's initial draft report sent to the Hirshhorn Trustees contains no information about the relevant experience and qualifications of its members. The four members are in fact enrolled in an internal Smithsonian "leadership institute" program; each may be quite capable in his or her regular employee position, yet as "experts" assigned to objectively evaluate a major initiative with long-term implications for the entire Smithsonian, their qualifications differ drastically from the blue-ribbon teams of external consultants that have been engaged to assess projects of similar magnitude at the Smithsonian American History Museum and other areas of the Institution. Nor has any member of the Assessment Team had direct experience presenting the many kinds of events, including programs with contemporary artists, envisioned for the SIS and Center for Creative Dialogue.

For all of these reasons, the Project Assessment report must be regarded as a speedily compiled internal document – in effect, a staff assignment – and not as a professionally

commissioned, appropriately objective study that fully and accurately presents the purpose, nature, and role of the SIS initiative within the Hirshhorn and the Smithsonian.

More Than A Tent On the Mall: The SIS Program and the Assessment Report

From the outset, the SIS and the Center for Creative Dialogue were conceived as an integral, interdependent initiative: a new kind of space that deliberately breaks with conventional auditorium formats in order to provide a flexible, multi-use environment for events of many kinds, including conferences, master classes, readings, screenings, and other public presentations. Most importantly, as part of the Hirshhorn's essential mission, the SIS and Center will offer, in the words of the acclaimed artist and Trustee Ann Hamilton, "an entirely new *condition* in which artists can create new work, a space for a kind of programming we still don't know." Other great museums such as MOMA, the Guggenheim, and the Tate are re-energizing their entire buildings as curated, content-rich environments instead of pass-through spaces between galleries. Similarly, the SIS and its programs will transform the Hirshhorn's central atrium from a lifeless void to a vibrant 21st-century setting in which to explore the cultural, artistic, social – and most importantly, educational – issues of our time as these affect and inspire each other.

The SIS, in other words, is not intended to be just a tent on the Mall. It cannot and will not exist without its programs (a fact that makes Scenario 2 of the Assessment Team's report – making the SIS only a "Special Events Venue" – entirely irrelevant). The SIS/Center programs will not only be appropriate to the Hirshhorn's and the Smithsonian's educational mission, but will expand the definition of museum-based learning. From the beginning, the SIS has been conceived and presented to the Smithsonian as an Institution-wide asset, and its peerless central location and dramatic presence, together with programs that represent all of the Smithsonian's disciplines, will further ensure its value to the Institution.

The Assessment Report deals superficially (at best) with the integral relationship between the SIS and its programs. At the outset, the report flatly contradicts itself: on page 2, the Team Charter lists "analysis of the risks and benefits...of possible or proposed SIS annual programs" – yet immediately following, on page 3 the report states that "the team was NOT charged with...critiquing the proposed Center for Creative Dialogue programming." In subsequent pages the report alludes generally to "Program," "access to government and thought leaders," and the fact that "this type of arts/culture dialogue does not exist in DC," with no further details. No effort was made by the Assessment Team to truly understand the program – or acknowledge that the Hirshhorn core group, in consultation with many others, has devoted enormous work to various programmatic concepts and options (and not merely "three 3-day conferences"). Had the Assessment Team conducted a balanced study, it would have learned that since the proposal for the Center for Creative Dialogue was presented to the Hirshhorn Board last fall, even more has been done to flesh out the program plan with events of many types, especially with more involvement by artists. The Team also would have learned, contrary to the negative implications on page 8 in its report, that the SIS and Center programs will not be a "challenge" to current Hirshhorn programming, but rather, will be developed in order to *complement and enhance* the Museum's exhibitions and other public programs. This is already understood by the Hirshhorn curators and public programs staff who, over the past 4 years, have been participating with the core group in conceptualizing programs that they themselves will lead in the SIS and Center. (A related note: On page 16 of the report, the observation that the Hirshhorn's "exhibition program has been *reduced* by recent staff and budgetary constraints" is erroneous: the Museum has *added* 2 new curators in recent years and is presenting a more ambitious, international, and

thematic exhibition agenda than ever, in keeping with the goals of the “7 priorities” paper reviewed by the Board in 2009; as further evidence of this, visitor attendance and bookstore revenues have soared in the past year.)

The overall effect of the Smithsonian’s Assessment Report, therefore, is as if the Assessment Team had simply been told that a new conference facility was being created on the Mall, and that the resulting program would have little or nothing to do with its actual surroundings and context – except, perhaps, for being a threat to existing Smithsonian and/or Hirshhorn programs (per the “challenges” sections to the various report Scenarios). The report fails to show that any real effort was also made to study the capacity of the SIS and Center to *benefit* the Hirshhorn, the Smithsonian, and far beyond as an original, innovative, *program-based initiative*. Nor does the report show that in reality, there is *no* “comparable” initiative at the Smithsonian today – and hence, that the SIS and Center’s program concepts must properly be evaluated using new criteria, rather than using boilerplate “benchmarking” methods to justify this negative stance. Ultimately, therefore, this inflexible and conventional approach to the SIS-Center project, together with the types of “challenges” listed in the report, makes it seem that the Team has concluded that there are absolutely no possible scenarios for the initiative’s existence – difficult to imagine, given the past four years of interest and endorsement from national and international cultural, academic, media, civic, and government leaders – and by the Smithsonian itself. If nothing else, in keeping with the SIS and Center’s “mission-critical” Smithsonian status, the report should also have evaluated the proposed programming in light of its capacity to contribute to exactly the kind of multidisciplinary, collaborative, intra- and inter-institutional agenda that Secretary Clough and the Smithsonian senior leadership are aggressively promoting in the Institution-wide Grand Challenges and consortia initiatives.

Corrections to Some Fiscal Assumptions in the Assessment Report

In addition to accurately presenting the programmatic mission, it is important to correct some of the financial figures presented in the Assessment report. As noted in Scenario 1 (page 6 of the report), the projected corporate sponsorship level was reduced from the Hirshhorn’s \$500,000 estimate to \$300,000, based upon “Lead/major donor” at Smithsonian “comparable programs.” As noted above, there are currently *no* programs at the Smithsonian truly comparable to the SIS-Center for Creative Dialogue. The Hirshhorn’s \$500,000 estimate for corporate sponsorship in an SIS season is not a wild, uninformed guess: There is already strong interest from three international corporate sponsors for \$250,000 each – again, information that would have been readily available had the Assessment Team conducted a thorough study with project staff at the Museum. There is every reason to believe that corporate sponsors will be attracted by the recognition and visibility opportunities offered by the dramatically sited SIS venue and its innovative, future-oriented, radically different programs – and that they will pay generously for this.

The report’s projections for special event rental revenues, also on page 6, are also very general, and inconsistent with current Hirshhorn realities. A day rental of the Museum spaces is estimated at only \$5,000, and an evening rental at \$15,000. Yet already the Hirshhorn frequently rents its spectacular third-floor Lerner Room for \$10,000, and the entire museum for \$25,000, including the Lobby and Plaza. (To compare with just one other popular Washington venue, the East Hall of Union Station rents for \$13,000 and seats a maximum of 330.) Again, the uniqueness of the SIS – and its seasonal time limits – will warrant rental fees well above those projected in the Assessment report.

The Assessment Report's projected estimate for Gala revenue – again, on page 6 – is also reduced from the Hirshhorn's estimate of \$475,000 to \$300,000, based on SI "comparable galas" including the recent Ai Weiwei party. There is little doubt that a gala for the SIS – and moreover, a gala with the additional cachet of inaugurating the Structure and Center – will have a far broader draw and capacity to generate revenue than a party for an exhibition opening.

And finally, the report must be corrected in mistakenly stating, as it does in all three of its Scenarios, that "the construction cost does not include two years of installation..." when in fact, the construction cost verified by the architects and engineers explicitly *does* include the initial installation. Hence the operational expenses, which include installation and de-installation every time in all three Scenarios, are inaccurate. Moreover, the seasonal installation-de-installation cost of \$958,000 stated in the report will be steadily reduced as the mechanisms involved are better understood by the engineers and others involved with this process.

A Remarkable Fund-Raising Campaign, and Its Larger Implications

The SIS initiative has secured several generous high-profile sponsors to date, each of whom is known for their rigorous, highly selective grant-making. These are anything but "casual" gifts. Via their support, these sponsors have expressed their confidence in the initiative's capacity to create new educational and collaborative models of many kinds, and in its suitability to a 21st-century institution in the nation's capital.

A majority of Hirshhorn Trustees have also expressed similar confidence in the SIS initiative via their own generous gifts and pledges. Since the beginning of this year, moreover, the special SIS Committee of Trustees has conducted an intensive campaign to complete the funding necessary to construct the Structure. Thanks to the additional support of one Trustee, the nationally respected CCS fund-raising consulting firm has also been engaged to help coordinate the campaign, with personnel embedded at the Hirshhorn through August 2013.

The energy and rapid results already generated by this campaign are unique in the Museum's history. To date, several *dozen* proposals to individuals, corporations, and foundations have been submitted or are in progress. In the last three weeks nearly \$2 million in new gifts and pledges has been received, and additional gifts look very promising.

What has also become clear is the fact that the SIS campaign carries far larger benefits to the Hirshhorn and the Smithsonian. The identification and cultivation of new prospects is enlarging the Museum's and Institution's potential donor base overall, and will be highly useful for exhibition fund-raising and other needs long into the future. The close involvement of Trustees in this process has also been extremely positive in terms of eliciting new leadership and cooperation.

Of particular relevance, the SIS and Center for Creative Dialogue also provide a powerful centerpiece – some say the only true centerpiece – for the Hirshhorn's portion of the larger Smithsonian campaign now underway. No other initiative at the Museum (and few others throughout the entire Institution) can match the visual excitement, donor recognition opportunities, public interest, and long-range capacity to create entirely new types of programs to the degree of the SIS.

All of these factors should temper the Board's recommendations and the Secretary's decision – and perhaps even the decision's timing as well – whether to proceed with the SIS initiative. The

fund-raising firm, in place through August, could accomplish a great deal more in its contracted period, laying the groundwork for additional gifts to the SIS construction and program as well as for exhibitions and other public programs. This work could also have a substantial effect on the success of the Hirshhorn's contribution to the larger Smithsonian campaign.

A Phased Approach to Constructing the SIS

Substantial funding needed to construct the SIS is now pledged or in hand. The current shortfall, together with the challenges of sequestration and related issues, make it possible to consider two options: to construct the entire SIS at one time as initially planned – or to build it in two phases. If the latter becomes necessary, the architects and engineers have verified that the first phase would be the complete “Bubble” filling the Museum's central atrium – the primary, 12,000-square-foot portion of the original inflatable design with its dramatic dome. This would defer several million dollars of the total construction cost to a later date. When the remaining funds are received, the other components of the design, including the “X-space” extending from the Museum's exterior wall, could be constructed, completing the architect's award-winning original scheme.

The second option would require rigorous planning and a strict timetable, particularly important in terms of ensuring the early donors that their support will continue to result in the vision that they endorsed. Again, no matter which option is selected, the complete original, highly acclaimed Structure design will ultimately be built.

A Flexible Approach to the Programmatic Sequencing

The SIS report to the Hirshhorn board last fall clearly stated three timing options for the program seasons: once every year; two consecutive program seasons followed by a season every 18 months; or once every two years. For reasons that are unclear, the Smithsonian Project Assessment does not discuss any of this programmatic flexibility, and instead, merely presents three annual scenarios (one of which, devoted only to renting the facility for the entire season, has never been an option at all, despite the strong potential for earned rental income that the Hirshhorn's report envisions in its program report).

Among the many advantages of taking a more nuanced approach to the seasonal programmatic agendas and timing is the fact that this will allow for all-important “organic” development of the programs. Each season in this more flexible framework can yield many kinds of information to use in subsequent seasons (information that will be useful for the Smithsonian overall in its events-oriented agenda, not “just” the Hirshhorn). This could include adjustments in the content, presentation formats, types of presenters, types of events, related amenities, and the flexibility necessary to adjust and respond to unexpected historic events in the arts, culture, and society. In addition, of course, this nuanced approach will ensure greater fiscal stability and manageability overall.

The Larger View

In conclusion, as stated by the eminent architectural historian and scholar Victoria Newhouse, the SIS represents far more than a seasonal or temporary “intervention” in an existing structure. “The Bubble is very much at the forefront of a trend today of temporary cultural spaces which are very appropriate and cost-saving...the Bubble would cost the fraction of the cost of a new [museum] wing...One of the problems with ivory-tower institutions is that until recently they divorced themselves from the real world, and it's clear today that the general audience is rejecting the formality of traditional public spaces...We are in the process of revolutionary changes for museums, libraries, and concert halls, and the Seasonal Inflatable Structure is completely in line with this new significant trend.”